From: Martin Kramer, *The war on error: Israel, Islam, and the Middle East.* New Brunswick, NJ and and London: Transaction Publishers, 2016, pp. 9-17.

2

The Shifting Sands of Academe

(A lecture delivered to students at Harvard University)

Nothing is more stimulating, as a student, than living through a time of upheaval in one's field. Professors dislike upheaval—they are more interested in building and expansion, and in establishing their authority and reach. But perhaps once in thirty years, a field will experience a dramatic upheaval that changes its contours. In such times of trouble, there is much turbulence, and there are winners and losers. When the dust has settled, the field has a new configuration. I lived through just such a time as a student, over thirty years ago.

I began my study of the Middle East in 1972, which was the tail end of the long, massive expansion of Middle Eastern studies that had started twenty years earlier. Despite the growth, it was still a fairly small enterprise that hadn't quite found its place in the American university. It was rather heavily dependent on two things: the importation of scholars from abroad, especially from Europe and to a lesser extent the Middle East; and the influx of dollars from Washington, which floated the new Middle East centers and provided most of the fellowship money.

The mandarins of those days did everything possible to avoid identification with the political causes of the Middle East. Middle Eastern studies, it was thought at the time, would only prosper in the academy if their practitioners demonstrated a studied neutrality toward the conflicts they studied.

I had one professor who was meticulous to a tee in his wholly dispassionate and disinterested analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict in his class. I asked him how he managed it. He asked me this question: what was Palestine in the year 600? I answered: a part of the Byzantine Empire. And what was it in 700? I answered: a part of the Arab Empire. And then he said: I simply analyze the transformations of the present at the same

distance from which I analyze those of the seventh century. In other words, just imagine that you don't have a dog in the fight. He assumed that the whole point of scholarship was to act disinterested—not just to others, but to oneself.[1]

The Book and the Revolution

All this began to unravel in the 1970s, with dramatic events in the Middle East itself. After 1967, there was a great awakening among Jews and Arabs in America, and the rise of a new kind of identity politics. In the Middle East, Black September and terrorism, and the outbreak of civil war in formerly placid Lebanon, drew America into the region. Our teachers began to take sides; departmental brown bag lunches became less congenial.

And then, in my first years as a grad student, came a double crisis: publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the Iranian revolution. Said's book landed like a bomb on Princeton, where I was a graduate student. I rushed down to the university book store to lay my hands on this incendiary work, and went straight to the index to look up all my teachers. The grad students had a meeting; the faculty were divided over whether to ignore the book or respond. Princeton's stars had been especially targeted by Said: the famous Bernard Lewis, the now-forgotten Morroe Berger, and others. The general inclination was to ignore the book, thinking it would fade away. It was so flawed, so lacking in rigor, so rife with egregious mistakes of fact and interpretation. Much of this was dutifully noted in various reviews.

What my teachers didn't understand was that the influence of the book would arise from a deeper need, as a manifesto for a group of younger political activists, who had decided that the academy was the perfect platform for politics and who wanted to break down its doors. They hoped to do so by delegitimizing the established scholars who approached the present like the seventh century, and by establishing their brand of advocacy as tantamount to scholarship. Said's book was the perfect manifesto for an insurgency.

The other event was the Iranian revolution. It cut entirely in the opposite direction. Why? The political activists misread it, the Orientalists got it right. While doing my thesis research in London, I ran down to Charing Cross Road to buy the first book on Iran's revolution, by one of the left insurgents. It predicted the imminent demise of the shah—and his replacement with a progressive government.[2] Back in Princeton, in February 1979, I attended an event hosted by Professor

Richard Falk, self-styled champion of the oppressed, who paraded before an audience of six hundred students an array of leftist Iranian revolutionaries. All of them had one message: pay no attention to the men in the turbans, they'll go back to the mosques when this is over, give the revolution your support. (I have returned to the *Daily Princetonian* to check my memory against the record. Quote from one of the speakers: "We are going to have a republic, a democracy. Every group in Iran is emphasizing the words 'democratic' and 'republic' as much as 'Islamic.'")[3] The speakers got a standing ovation.

But in the Near Eastern Studies department, someone had put his hands on Khomeini's treatise on Islamic government, in Arabic. No one in America had yet read it or translated it, but it had been in the bowels of Firestone Library, and photocopies began to circulate among us. If you could read Arabic, and knew something about reading an Islamic text, you got the message. Like *Orientalism*, Khomeini's book was also a manifesto, and it was about delegitimation and validation—yes, delegitimation of the shah, but validation of Islamic government, administered directly by the men in turbans. But you had to be an Orientalist to understand it.

So these were the two events that turned the world upside down in my graduate student days. Said's book had a profound influence, and largely achieved its intended effect. The insurgents rode the wave of the new left's academization, turning all their favorite causes, above all Palestine, into jobs, books, and tenure. But out there, in the real Middle East, the Iranian revolution set off the growth of Islamist movements that the new mandarins could never quite explain. They tried—and they still try—to squeeze them into convenient categories, to cast them—as Richard Falk did—as cousins to the revolutionary movements they did admire. But they couldn't (and, I would argue, still can't) get it right, which is why these movements consistently surprise them, and rarely surprise those who do the things Orientalists used to do—that is, take texts and ideas seriously.

Gestation of a Controversy

When I finished my studies, in 1981, the atmosphere had been poisoned against Bernard Lewis, my teacher. Having studied under him put a question mark by me. I have a rather vivid recollection of appearing before the Social Science Research Council grants committee in New York for an interview: I could have cut the animosity with a knife. So I didn't bother looking for a job in America. One was offered to me in

Israel (where I had spent two years as an undergraduate), and I took it. Over the years, I earned tenure at Tel Aviv University, I directed the Middle East center there, and I did what Middle East experts do. I focused on modern Arab history and Islamic movements. I had a reputation, in the United States too, as a thorough and solid scholar of these things.

But as the 1990s ensued, I saw a new trend in the field, and it troubled me. It was a certain approach to Islamist movements that abandoned the requisite scholarly distance, and cast them in an almost heroic light, as incorruptible, reform-minded, socially responsible, democratically inclined. Even Edward Said, who had never been a friend of Islamist movements, began not so much to praise them as to attack those who criticized them. It was a replay of what I had witnessed in the lead-up to Iran's revolution. So I began to write against this trend, still not naming names.[4] It was one thing for Middle Eastern studies to have elevated the Palestinians as exemplars of a new politics, a new hope—that was dubious enough. But to see the same glossy hyperbole heaped on the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and the folks in Hezbollah whom I had studied in the 1980s—that was too much.

By the end of the 1990s, I was already on a collision course with some of my colleagues. But I think what resolved me to write a critique of Middle Eastern studies was an event that made clear to me how much I had missed while away from American academe. In 1998, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) organized a panel to mark twenty years to the publication of *Orientalism*, and it featured Edward Said himself. Speaker after speaker declared the final and irreversible victory of Edward Said over the forces of reaction, and congratulated him on his triumph. His acolytes and disciples, now secure in their academic chairs and directorships, seemed to me even more smugly self-confident than the old mandarins they had dethroned and replaced. Their arrogance shocked me—it showed me just how little room remained for different approaches in the field. And so I decided to throw a rock through the window.

I should add that it wasn't a particularly pleasant task, because I had been on speaking terms with almost all the *dramatis personae.* But to have excluded people I knew and even liked would have been a kind of intellectual favoritism that would have diminished the credibility of the enterprise. Even as I wrote certain paragraphs, I suspected I would be burning bridges forever. It is not something I recommend to graduate students.

My book *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America,* was published by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy in late 2001. I won't recap its arguments. But there are a few points worth noting. When you write a book, you imagine a certain reader standing over your shoulder, and you write it with that reader in mind. I did the writing, almost all of it, before 9/11, and my imaginary reader was someone within Middle Eastern studies. The book was intended to shift, however slightly, the balance within the field.

As it happened, though, *Ivory Towers on Sand* appeared just six weeks after 9/11, in the midst of a great debate over what it all meant, and this supercharged the book. It was the subject of an article in the *New York Times*, which brought me thousands of readers who had never cared a whit about Middle Eastern studies.[5] This included journalists, officials and concerned citizens, but it also included deans, provosts, and university presidents. Suddenly Middle Eastern studies became a flashpoint in the culture wars. It would have happened even without my book, but I suspect I accelerated the process.

I then poured oil on the fire: I wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal,* timed to coincide with MESA's first post-9/11 conference, calling on Congress not to put another penny into the field.[6] Franklin Foer, later editor of *The New Republic,* was prompted by my book to cover that conference (it was in San Francisco), and he reported that "there was one universally acknowledged villain at the conference—it just wasn't Osama bin Laden." It was Martin Kramer. Hissing followed mention of my name in a plenary session.[7] I resolved to take it as a compliment.

But the reaction within the field was not universally hostile. A little over a year after publication, I appeared in Washington with the then-president of MESA, Lisa Anderson, for a discussion of the state of Middle Eastern studies. She described my arguments as overstated, but also said that within the field, the book had been regarded as a useful intervention.[8] In 2005, I was invited (much to my astonishment) to speak at the thirtieth anniversary conference of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown. I doubt that would have happened if my critique had been totally out of bounds. In my remarks there, I said something that perfectly summarized my limited aim vis-à-vis my colleagues: "My mission is very simple. It isn't to convince anyone in this room—that's beyond my power. It is to plant a seed of doubt. If you find yourself, against every impulse and instinct, agreeing with just one thing I say, I will regard this morning as well spent."[9]

The Critics Speak

My critics usually agreed with one or two things I said, but disagreed with much more of it. Just consult the review essays in *Foreign Affairs, International Affairs,* and the *Middle East Journal.* There weren't any surprises in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* either. Some critiques were more interesting than others. The least interesting were the ones that attacked me for claiming that Middle Eastern studies should have predicted 9/11. That isn't the thrust of the book. I added only one page to the text after 9/11, at the last moment, and it was to show how some persons in the field had argued that a 9/11-type scenario was a scare tactic of the so-called terrorism industry.

But while I didn't argue that scholars could predict specific events, I do believe that it is hard to accept the validity of a paradigm if everything that occurs subsequent to its formulation seems to contradict it. In any case, it has always been the claim of Middle Eastern studies, in the pleas of its leaders for funding from Washington, that it somehow better equips the United States for anticipating trends in the Middle East. In fact, the motto of MESA might be: "If you'd only listened to us." And I haven't noticed any particular reticence among scholars about invoking their academic credentials when making predictions. So these critics, it seems to me, protest too much.

A more interesting criticism was that I had overestimated the influence of Said on the field. This came from several directions, most significantly from the left activist academics who got their start in something called MERIP. In my student days, these people had been developing their own critique of the establishment even before Said's book, which upstaged them. Now they were claiming that they, and not Said, had done more to revolutionize the field.[10]

But this raises the even more interesting question of why they turned Said into the icon of transformation in Middle Eastern studies. He was even made an honorary member of MESA, a rare distinction reserved for those who have made signal contributions to the field (and a distinction, by the way, withheld from Bernard Lewis). In almost every introductory course on methodology, *Orientalism* is required reading. It may be true that *Orientalism* has had less of an impact on Middle Eastern studies than on postcolonial studies. But in the only (ad hoc) survey to ask Middle East scholars to name the "best" books in the field, *Orientalism* emerged on top.[11] So the burden of proof rests on these critics, and they have yet to assume it.

The most valid criticism is that I committed the same sins as *Orientalism*—that is, I cherry-picked my evidence, and tied it up in a polemical package. I plead guilty to some of that, and I admit that I had *Orientalism* as one of my models in writing *Ivory Towers on Sand*. But I plead extenuating circumstances in these two respects. First, if this method is permitted to Said, why should it be denied to me? And second, at least I did my cherry-picking at the center of the orchard. I knew to distinguish between the center of Middle Eastern studies and the edges, and I took all my egregious examples from the heart of the field. Said's book is all over the orchard. You may accuse me of being selective; but you can't accuse me of citing marginal examples to indict the field as a whole.

Opening Space

What has been the long-term effect of my book? It has lived several lives. It has been taught in courses. It was invoked by organizations like Campus Watch as inspiration for their project. It was used by a university president to raise support for an alternative Middle East center. Lawrence Summers, when he was president of Harvard, took it with him to a meeting with the Middle East faculty, to ask if there was any truth to it. (He told me they weren't amused.) It was sent by various people to provosts and congressmen (and was cited in testimony before Congress). I can't keep track of all the purposes it has served, and I'm not responsible for them either.

My hope is that, ultimately, the book will be remembered as having opened some space in the academy for a wider range of views. Making more space is messy business in practice, because it is a zero-sum game. Some win, some lose, and at any one point in time, it's hard to tell the score. But I believe the field has become more diverse than it was a decade ago. This is mostly the result of larger changes in America's relationship to the Middle East, especially due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since 9/11, perhaps two million Americans have come through the Middle East, and some have gone into academe. They have been influenced by harsh encounters with realities. But some small part of this change may be a legacy of *Ivory Towers on Sand,* and that gives me some satisfaction.

Today's students of the Middle East are fortunate, as I was, to witness a period of upheaval in the Middle East. Some months after I published *Ivory Towers,* I received a note from the head of a Middle East center, someone I wouldn't have thought sympathetic to my project.

Text

"We don't know one another," he wrote, "but I wanted to let you know that I liked your book. And to thank you for leaving me out! I wish only that conditions were such that younger scholars-in-the-making were launching these polemics."

He had a point. People ask me sometimes whether I intend to write another book on Middle Eastern studies. My answer is no—the next book should be written by people who are thirty years younger than I am. It should be written by young scholars like you.

Notes

1. I leave it to Don Peretz to reveal this professor's identity: "There are quite a few academicians and writers who seem to have dealt with the Middle East in a fashion that does not betray their ethnic, class, or religious roots. I believe that J. C. Hurewitz sought to attain this 'objectivity' in his work and attempted to instill it in his students. Of course this irritated, even exasperated, some of his students and readers who complained that they never could find out where he stood on sensitive issues such as the Arab-Israel dispute." Don Peretz, "Vignettes—Bits and Pieces," in *Paths to the Middle East: Ten Scholars Look Back,* ed. Thomas Naff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 255.
2. This was Fred Halliday. He opined that "the ayatollahs and mullahs on their own can probably not sustain or channel the popular upsurge," but he felt certain others might, and the book ended on this optimistic note: "It is quite possible that before too long the Iranian people will chase the Pahlavi dictator and his associates from power, will surmount the obstacles in its way, and build a prosperous and socialist Iran." Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 299, 309.
3. Douglas Schwartz, "Falk Discusses Iranians, Khomeini," *Daily Princetonian*, February 9, 1979. Only one week later, Falk published his most memorable op-ed, where he wrote this: "The depiction of [Khomeini] as fanatical, reactionary and the bearer of crude prejudices seems certainly and happily false. . . . Having created a new model of popular revolution based, for the most part, on nonviolent tactics, Iran may yet provide us with a desperately needed model of humane governance for a third-world country." Richard Falk, "Trusting Khomeini," *New York Times,* February 16, 1979.
4. Most notably, "Islam vs. Democracy," *Commentary* 95, no. 1 (January 1993): 35–42.
5. Richard Bernstein, "Experts on Islam Pointing Fingers at One Another," *New York Times*, November 3, 2001.
6. Martin Kramer, "Terrorism? What Terrorism?!," *Wall Street Journal,* November 15, 2001. This prompted a letter of response from Edward Said, which appeared on December 4, 2001.
7. Franklin Foer, "San Francisco Dispatch: Disoriented," *The New Republic,* December 3, 2001.
8. Martin Kramer and Lisa Anderson, "Middle Eastern Studies: What Went Wrong?," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* no. 691 (December 16, 2002).

9. Martin Kramer, "Arab Studies: My Critical Review," *Sandbox* blog, April 1, 2005, archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20101226223436/http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/2005/04/arab-studies-my-critical-review/.
10. Most notably, Fred Halliday, "9/11 and Middle Eastern Studies, Past and Future: Revisiting Ivory Towers on Sand," *International Affairs* 80, no. 5 (October 2004): 953–62; and Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 257–65. Lockman allowed that my critique "may seem to resonate with those set forth in this book," an interesting convergence.
11. Garth Hall, "The 21 'Best' Books in Middle East Studies," *MESC Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (November 2005), archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20060209102204/http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/mesc/PDF/MESC%20November%202005%20Issue.pdf.